

S P E E C H

OF THE

HON. A. G. WATKINS, OF TENNESSEE,

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, JUNE 20, 1850.

On the bill providing for the Soldiers of the War of 1812, 1813, 1814, 1815, with Great Britain; the Indian Wars 1811; the Florida (Seminolean) War of 1835, 1836, &c.; and the War, known as General Wayne's, of 1792 to 1795, that have not heretofore been provided for:

Mr. WATKINS said : Mr. Chairman, I desired to obtain the floor before the time had so nearly arrived for the termination of the debate, when I would have had more time for elaboration than is now allowed me. I have no wish, however, to prolong the debate beyond the limits assigned it, by the parliamentary action and decision of the committee, if it were in my power to evade that rule. Much less do I wish to obtrude any very lengthy remarks upon the committee, as I shall have to condense and abridge what I have to say, so as to attain all the points I desired to make in my argument within the prescribed rule. I shall, therefore, proceed without further preliminary remarks to offer to the consideration of the committee the reasons which govern my action in reference to the bill.

It is proper that I should notice some of the arguments made by distinguished members who addressed the committee on yesterday in opposition to the bill. By reference to the statistical reports, to be found of record in the different offices in this city, the number of acres of public lands belonging to the Government of the United States, the number of soldiers that appear from the rolls in the Adjutant General's office to have been engaged in the services that the bill is designed to provide for, and the proportion of this domain in actual acres that it would require to fill its provisions, should it become a law, can all be easily ascertained. It will be seen, Mr. Chairman, as shown by the statistics which I have felt it my duty to collect, and which I am about to exhibit to the committee, that it will be a very small expenditure, as compared with the whole amount of public lands, and the vast advantages accruing therefrom to those to whom they are proposed to be given.

The whole number of troops in the war of 1812, that were authorized to be raised by enlistment, was about fifty-nine thousand. Of this number forty thousand were raised under acts that authorized bounty land to the recruits. The number of persons who have received bounty land under these acts is twenty-eight thousand six hundred and eighty. The number of enlisted troops not entitled to bounty land was about nineteen thousand. The whole number of militia in said war is about four hundred and seventy-five thousand. Of this number about sixty-five thousand served over six months, and less than twelve months ; one hundred thousand over three, and less than six months, and the balance less than three months. There are about sixteen hundred millions of acres of public lands belonging to the United States. Thus it is shown to any one who will give himself the trouble to compare these estimates, and make the calculation, that not more than forty to fifty millions will be required, at the utmost, to meet all these objects.

If, however, all the amendments, or any considerable number of them, should be rejected, and the bill pass in the shape in which it came from the committee, so that those who served six months or more shall receive the benefit of the law, it will very greatly diminish the amount of land contained in this estimate. From this calculation, which is based upon the most authentic and accurate information, derived from sources that have been accredited by the Government, it is manifest that honorable gentlemen have given themselves much unnecessary trouble to prove to the committee and to the country their peculiar and extreme solicitude at this particular time, and upon this occasion, to husband the resources of the Government and economize her expenditures. Not more than one-twentieth part of the public domain would be diverted or withdrawn from the revenue of the Government by the most liberal and extravagant calculation, under the original bill and all the pending amendments, and in the shape in which I fear it will be most likely to pass, not more than one-fiftieth.

The honorable member from Ohio (Mr. VINTON) labored, in his argument of yesterday, if I understood him correctly, to convince members that the result of a system of legislation by which the public lands were to be appropriated for such purposes as are specified in this and similar bills, would be to exhaust the Treasury of the nation, creating a necessity either for an increase of duties upon imports, or a resort to direct taxation to supply the deficiency. Since I recollect to have noticed the debates in this House, and political discussions elsewhere, it has been the custom to resort to this argument for the purpose of alarming gentlemen under certain circumstances, and to effect certain results, that were not easily produced by a more calm and dispassionate mode of reasoning. And I doubt not, sir, that that which was a mere phantom in its conception has, by frequent repetition, grown into reality in the opinion of honorable gentlemen, in their estimate of the enormities of this measure. This is but the natural result and inevitable tendency of a continued and repeated estimate and recital of the imaginary evils growing out of what is conceived to be an encroachment upon the rights and interests of the Government, considered as separate and distinct from those of the people in their sovereign and primary capacity. This overweening solicitude to guard the treasure of the Nation, and protect it from the depredations of extravagant legislation, is the result, on the part of members, of a fastidious regard for the pecuniary character and ability of the Government, which, next to its honor and independence, should be the highest aim of a legislator, and is an object honorable in itself. I am quite sure that it is not the result of improper motives, or an undue indifference to the rights and interests of the people, which I would be the last to ascribe to any gentleman upon this floor. It is too apparent, however, sir, that it is the fixed and determined purpose of the opponents of this bill to drive members from its support by the combined influence of the terrors of direct taxation and the charge of demagogueism that has been repeatedly made against the advocates of the measure, by those who have felt it to be their duty to oppose its passage. Now, sir, I am incapable of seeing the dangers that other gentlemen have discovered, of the Government being forced into direct taxation by any effect that can possibly result from this appropriation of land. Nor can I, Mr. Chairman, discover from any argument that has been made, or from any evidence that has been adduced by any one of the able gentlemen that have addressed the committee in opposition to the bill, that an increase of revenue duties would necessarily follow its passage. A single argument is sufficient to present clearly and conclusively to the minds of all who view the question in its true character, the utter fallacy of the grounds upon which this opposition is based. Suppose, sir, for the sake of argument, and in order that all who oppose its passage may have the full benefit of all their doubts and apprehensions, that the lands pro-

posed to be set apart for the benefit of this patriotic, time-honored, and meritorious class of the soldiery of our common country, were worth, or would be worth, in the next fifty years, the Government price; and that the Government would, or could, in that length of time, realize that amount for them—a result which no gentleman in this House anticipates—I ask again, sir, if this were true, and when you compare it with the almost boundless domain yet remaining which will not be even occupied in the next fifty years, where is the magnitude of the evils or difficulties growing out of this system of bounty land favoritism, as the honorable member from South Carolina (Mr. HOLMES) styles it?

But it has been argued by the able and distinguished gentleman from Illinois, (Mr. BISSELL,) and confirmed by the learned and eloquent gentleman from Georgia, (Mr. STEPHENS,) that all the public lands yet disposed of have not yielded to the Treasury, after all expenses and contingencies have been paid and accounted for, more than some five to seven cents per acre. And, Mr. Chairman, the statement has not been controverted by any gentleman who has participated in the debate. This, sir, in my opinion, is not wide of the correct estimate. Now, sir, contrast this with amounts shown to have been footed up in the regular annual appropriation bills and deficiency bills, and it will be found that it is an almost inconceivably small fraction as compared with the multiplied millions that appear in those bills. When gentlemen turn their mind's eye to the almost incomprehensible resources of this great country, separate and apart from the public domain, they will perceive that this trifling appropriation of the public lands is lost sight of in the comparison. Much has been said, sir, during the discussion about demagogism. Doubtless, honorable members differ as widely in their conceptions of what it takes to constitute demagogism as they do in all other matters pertaining to the high and solemn duties of legislation. This charge has been reiterated time and again, as applied to the friends of this bill. I hold it to be the duty of every Representative upon this floor to obey and endeavor to carry out what he understands to be the will of his constituents, unless he conscientiously believes that the expression of public sentiment or popular will conflicts with an expressly declared or clearly defined provision of the Constitution; for questions of expediency in all Republics or representative governments are subservient to the will of the people, and, in my opinion, lose their salutary influence whenever they fail to reflect the popular will. So long, then, as a Representative is within the sphere of this duty, and in the advocacy of measures which he honestly believes to be constitutional, correct in principle, founded in reason, and meeting out justice to a hitherto much neglected and highly honorable and meritorious class of American citizens, and that, too, in compliance with the will of his constituents, he cannot be said to be playing the part of the demagogue. While I am free to disclaim any intention whatever to impugn the motives of any member upon this floor, I cannot refrain from the expression of the opinion, that must be apparent to all, that gentlemen have evinced a strong proclivity to ascribe this principle to the friends of the bill, but have never once acknowledged the existence of any such purpose in themselves. If an honest and assiduous purpose and determination to subserve these interests and to perform these duties subjects the friends of the bill to the severe criticisms upon their motives that have been liberally dealt out to them during this discussion, I am glad that I felt it my duty to be classed with the advocates of the measure. Again, sir; it has been urged as a ground of opposition to this bill, that it does not include sailors as well as soldiers. I claim, Mr. Chairman, to be as strongly impressed with a just and liberal sense of gratitude to this division of our forces for the gallant service and perilous adventures they performed in the service and defence of the country whenever her rights have been invaded, as any gentleman upon this floor. Yet, sir, it is perfectly clear to my mind, that the reasons do not

as strongly apply to sailors as to those who are designed to be made the recipients of the provisions of this bill. In the first place, Mr. Chairman, they are entitled to prize-money, which is a regular and fixed perquisite incident to their official occupation, the value and advantages of which would be worth, in all probability, a much greater sum than would the bounty proposed to be given to the soldiers included in this provision. Upon proper and fitting occasions, when the circumstances justified it, and the objects to be attained demanded it, I would go as far as any Representative in this Congress, I doubt not, to relieve or provide for our naval force in any emergency. This objection to the bill has been so fully and clearly answered in every other particular by my colleague from the Nashville district, that I regard any other or additional remark in reply to the objection, as urged by the honorable gentleman from Maryland, (Mr. EVANS,) wholly unnecessary.

Efforts have been made during the course of the debate—which has really taken a very wide and comprehensive range, gathering within its compass the *Wilmot proviso, tariff, slavery, &c.*, neither of which, Mr. Chairman, in my judgment, has any possible connection with it, or is in the slightest relation affected, by it—yet efforts have, I repeat, been made to array alternately the friends and enemies of all these measures against the bill. Now, sir, I cannot conceive, how the passage of this law could affect the manufacturing interests of the country thereby, as is supposed and maintained, rendering less secure and more inoperative the interests of the Southern and Western producing States. And just in this connection, I trust I will not be regarded as travelling out of the legitimate channel of this debate to allude to the strange and unnatural coincidence of the arguments of the honorable member from South Carolina, (Mr. HOLMES,) and the honorable member from Ohio, (Mr. VINTON,) both making the same deductions and arriving at similar conclusions drawn from premises diametrically opposite—the one a free trade man, and the other an advocate for protection? Let us pursue this question a little further, and see what would be the practical bearing, as compared with the peculiar tenets of the two systems. The doctrine of free trade, as I understand it, to the adherance and preservation of which the honorable member from South Carolina has cordially and enthusiastically appealed to his Southern friends to rally, allows everything to follow the natural laws of trade, selling where you can sell highest, and buying where you can buy cheapest; thus giving to every one the largest liberty, levying duties under the ad valorem principle, and that for revenue only, which could not possibly be effected by the passage of the bill under consideration. On the other hand, one of the chief arguments in favor of the other principle has ever been, that it would not only afford revenue to defray the expenses of Government, but would at the same time create a home market for the surplus productions of the country, thereby enhancing their value, and adding an incentive to the industry and enterprise of the country. So that, if it were true that by appropriating this amount of public lands you might create a necessity for an increase of revenue duties, it would not only, according to the hitherto legitimate, well-defined, and established doctrine of protection, produce revenue ample and sufficient to defray all the expenses of the Government, but would greatly improve the Southern and Western States, by giving to them this additional market for the surplus productions, and at advanced prices. I do not undertake to say, nor do I wish to be so understood, that this would be the effect in either event; but I do contend that these are the only legitimate conclusions to which I am able to arrive from the premises in the two positions, which I understand to be antagonistical.

Another objection to the bill, Mr. Chairman, is, that it will injure all the old States. I am unable to conceive that such would be the result. True, it would diminish the specific population in each old State, prospectively, in proportion to

the inducement it offered to emigration, but could not lessen the aggregate amount of population, and could not, therefore, have any bad effect even in that particular. It must inevitably improve the condition of those who emigrated west and occupy these lands, while no detriment could result to the States whence they emigrated, except a very slight and inconsiderable diminution in the numerical strength of population. But it has been said upon this point, that it would impair the value of land per acre in the old States, there being lands there now unoccupied and uncultivated, and requiring only to be reclaimed and improved to bring them into demand, and render them highly productive. This, Mr. Chairman, is doubtless true; but how a provision of law which would induce the surviving soldiers to emigrate and occupy these lands who spent the prime of life in the camp, and many of them at the sacrifice of their health and constitution—depriving them not only of the means of support and education of their families, which they may then have possessed, but disabling them from labor ever after, leaving them, in many instances, in poverty and destitution—could affect the price of land in a State where the prices of land are already so high that not one in an hundred of them would ever be able to purchase a ten-acre lot, is, to my mind, paradoxical, if not incomprehensible.

I cannot, sir, avoid the conclusion that all would be benefited, and that no inconvenience or injury would result to any State, new or old, or to the nation, by appropriating this fraction of the public domain to this just, this patriotic, this righteous purpose; thereby carrying out and confirming one of our most distinguishing national characteristics—that of gratitude to those who may be justly tyed our national benefactors. Again, sir, I hold it to be true, departing from the consideration of these special and technical arguments and objections, that the remaining portion of the domain, which is immense, would be increased in value, corresponding with, if not exceeding in value, the lands proposed to be inverted by this law. The effect that the settlement and improvement of the appropriated lands would have upon the character of the country where they were located, by bringing them into use and cultivation, and making them subservient to, and promotive of, the manifold interests and ends of civilization, would add a greatly enhanced value to the unappropriated lands to which they are contiguous. The impetus given to every branch of industry connected with this emigration will be felt and appreciated by all who will allow themselves to anticipate the paramount advantages to be derived not only to the soldier himself, but also by calling into action hundreds of laborers and producers, who are destined to become the beneficiaries of this law, and who, on account of their indigent and embarrassed circumstances, are unable to contribute anything to the productive character, or to the revenue of the country.

That the bill is defective, sir, in some of its provisions, is apparent to all who will give it a careful and critical examination; but that it could and would be so amended as to remedy most of the defects, I did not, until the debate had progressed to some extent, allow myself to doubt. I know, sir, that there are many who are highly deserving of the gratitude and protection of this Congress and the Government that are not included in the bill. Many I know, from my knowledge and recollection of the history of these wars, were drafted for six months, and who were, for different reasons, at the suggestions and by the voluntary act of the Government, honorably discharged prior to the expiration of the time for which they had been drafted; not without, however, having made the sacrifices, endured many of the privations, and encountered many of the difficulties and dangers to which they would have been exposed, had they served the time for which they had been drafted. Sir, I can see no just reason why such, although they may not have been in a single engagement, and may not have served more than one-half or one-fourth of the campaign, should not be

liberally provided for—they having done all in their power to carry out the purpose for which they were called into service. Holding myself to be a devoted and zealous, though humble advocate of the bill under consideration by the committee, I feel it to be as incumbent upon me to support an amendment to the bill, giving the most liberal allowance to those that the character of their service will justify—who were called out near the close of the war, and went forth to perform their duties—giving the surest and most unmistakable evidences and guaranties of their devotion to liberty and their country, but who, fortunately for themselves and the country, by a suspension of hostilities and conclusion of peace, were not allowed to carry out that determination, and test that devotion in actual conflict upon the field of battle. I know, sir, that all human laws and institutions are imperfect, and that failure on the part of those who draft them and debate them to adapt them to the expectations, requirements, and capacities of all for whom they are intended, and to whom they are submitted, is almost universally urged as a reason against the wisdom or propriety of the law itself. Although I do not expect the friends of this bill to be able to provide now for all those who richly merit and justly deserve the patronage and protection of the Government, and who demand attention, consideration, and relief at the hands of Congress, still I am for the most liberal and equal provisions that can be secured—so that we may reach the largest number that have been in actual service, as well as the most distinguished and meritorious. I have no thought that this point, from present indications, can be attained this session; yet it is the duty of the friends of the bill to secure the passage of the very best law they can get at the present session—though it may, and doubtless will, fall very far short of the wish of many of its friends. This accomplished, I have no fear that when the members of the present Congress shall have returned to the districts, and consulted and conferred with their constituents and ascertained their opinions and wishes upon the subject, they will return at the meeting the next session prepared to support such a law as will not only meet the just expectation of the people, but make ample provision for all those who may not be included in this, if it shall become a law.

The argument, Mr. Chairman, that a large share of the benefits resulting from this bill will accrue to speculators, though to some extent true in point of fact, will not receive a proportionate increase in consequence of the passage of the law. The convictions of my mind are, that so far from increasing in a corresponding degree the inducement for speculation, it would have a directly opposite effect, by increasing the number of land warrants in market, thereby lessening the inducement both to buy and sell; for, sir, I need not occupy the time or claim the indulgence of the committee, to repeat or multiply arguments to prove, which every gentleman on this floor knows to be true, that, according to the natural tendency and inevitable laws of trade, holders are induced to sell any commodity, whatever, in proportion to their notion of the just value of their property, compared with the price offered; while, on the other hand, it is equally true that purchasers are governed, in a great measure, by the number or amount of articles in market—the probable competition with which they have to contend in disposing of their purchases.

Looking, sir, to the business effects and practical bearing of this rule of trade, I am forced to the conclusion, that notwithstanding the fact that speculators would, under this law, as well as all others that ever have or ever will be engaged, share their portion of the profits, that their profits in this case, for the reasons enumerated, would be diminished rather than increased. And, sir, if this were not so, am I to be deterred or driven from the performance of what I believe most solemnly and conscientiously, to be not only a duty but an act of sheer justice and gratitude to a highly deserving and patriotic class of citizens, because

perchance, in the distribution or dispensation of justice to hundreds and thousands, a few encroachments and infractions should be made upon the law and its benefits?

My surprise has been excited during the progress of this debate, to hear gentlemen calculate the importance of this bill by the cold and iron rule of the loss or gain of a few shillings of the probable future treasure of the nation. Having already presented to the consideration of the Committee arguments designed to show that no considerable loss or inconvenience could result to the Treasury by this appropriation of land, but that the remaining domain would be improved and increased in value corresponding with this diversion. I deem it unnecessary to allude further to the arguments in answer to this objection. A labored effort and argument, however, of the honorable member from New York, (Mr. SACKETT,) to establish and carry out in good faith the stern, and, in this particular instance, oppressive contract between the soldier and his Government, demands some notice. Now, sir, I beg leave most respectfully to remind gentlemen that this mode of reasoning, while it is most illiberal to the soldier in a pecuniary point of view, does him still greater injustice when we apply it to his motives of action in point of patriotism and love of country. Sir, I cannot allow myself to imagine, for a single moment, that any American who has ever participated in any of the blessings of this free, this patriotic, this enlightened, this chivalrous, this liberty-loving country, even in its incipient struggles for freedom and independence, would consent that it should be said of him—that he had, or would, for the sake of pecuniary gain, strike a bargain with his Government to fight her battles, protect her women and children, guard her institutions, secure to her a fame and a character as elevated and irreproachable as the purity of republicanism itself. Yet, sir, it is urged by the gentleman from New York, in the face of all these facts and arguments, that they should be tied down by strict, rigorous, legal interpretation and construction to the pitiful and insignificant sum of seven dollars per month for the services by which they covered this country all over with laurels and honors and glories as imperishable as their own brilliant achievements upon the fields of battle.

Sir, I have the honor to represent, in part, a State that has in all the wars that have occurred in this country since her organization as a State, furnished her full quota of soldiers. And I enjoy the further and higher honor not only of representing, but knowing personally many of the recipients of this law, if it shall be passed; and I know, sir, that it will fall far short of what I regard as an adequate compensation to them for the many sacrifices they have made, not to estimate the services rendered. But I claim for them, Mr. Chairman, a higher and nobler ground upon which to stand in this contest than mere pecuniary consideration. It is gratifying to me to be able to state, that in my support of this measure, I have the hearty concurrence and co-operation of all my colleagues. Sir, it would be as foreign to my feelings or purpose to revoke, innovate, or violate the terms or the equitable import of a contract made between the Government and any of her citizens, as any gentleman upon this floor. But I feel assured that no one will go so far to deny that these lands have been acquired by the common blood and treasure of the country, and of course are under the control and at the disposal of Congress. There are millions of acres of them that are, and will be for years to come, entirely worthless to the Government. Congress having most unquestionably the right to dispose of them at her discretion, what more just, rational, or equitable distribution, I would ask, could be made of them, than to grant them in bounty to the soldiers by whose services they have in a great measure been acquired, and in the event of their death to their widows and children? Looking to the probable result of a system of speculation that will in any event be likely to grow out of the lands belonging to the United States, and trying as I do upon the varied and boundless resources of this country, I am al-

most ready to hope that these lands could now, all that have not heretofore been set apart or pledged for other and specific purposes, be appropriated in suitable bounties to relieve the distressed or oppressed portions of actual American citizens who would occupy and improve them, so as to make them a homestead for them and their children, or that they could be applied to the purposes of general and universal education, particularly in the South and West. Yes, sir, I repeat, that when I survey this vast country, stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, checkered by ten thousand fertilizing and majestic streams, affording inestimable agricultural, commercial and manufacturing facilities and advantages, such as are possessed in so eminent a degree by no other nation on earth, including her inexhaustible mineral resources of every description, I, sir, have no fears that if the last acre of her public lands were applied to the objects and purposes specified in this argument, that the revenues derived from these sources, as governed by the natural and inevitable laws of trade, would ever prove inadequate to defray all the expenses of this Government, ordinary and extraordinary, in any possible or conceivable contingency or emergency. Gentlemen seem to have forgotten the solemn teachings and admonitions of history; they appear to have lost sight of the high appreciation in which the soldiers of all the wars in which we have been involved, have been held, not only by Americans themselves, but by those of other countries with whom we have had intercourse. Sir, what the proud and magnificent edifice and superstructure owes to the foundation upon which it rests, do the American people owe to these gallant men and their compeers in arms, for the proud, the elevated, the commanding position of her character and institutions. I will not allow myself, upon this occasion, to recount the many brave, daring, perilous, and self-sacrificing deeds of valor that signalized the career and services of these brave men, lest it should be said that I am attempting to play the part of the demagogue, than which, if I know myself, nothing is more foreign from my purpose. But to turn from and abandon the consideration of these gallant, these affecting, these brilliant scenes and achievements, which are so indelibly portrayed and delineated upon a thousand pages of history, allow me, Mr. Chairman, to remind gentlemen that they are indebted to this very class of men for most of the inestimable blessings, privileges, and immunities in which they are now luxuriating, and of which we are all so justly proud.

It seems to me, sir, that no gentleman can look around him and survey the infinite and expansive prospects for future as well as present greatness and glory that encircle this happy country, and reflect whence it had its origin, and who are its founders, without experiencing a burst of gratitude glowing, swelling and expanding in his bosom, that would at once hush to silence, as by the voice of inspiration, all opposition to this bill.